

Message Text

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ACTION NEA-10

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FM AMEMBASSY TUNIS

TO SECSTATE WASHDC 0046

INFO AMEMBASSY ALGIERS

AMEMBASSY PARIS

AMEMBASSY RABAT

AMEMBASSY TRIPOLI

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E.O. 11652: N/A

TAGS: PINT, TS

SUBJECT: MOHAMED MASMOUDI: REHABILITATION OR NOT?

REF: TUNIS 4718

1. TUNISIAN POLITICAL CIRCLES CONTINUE TO SPECULATE ON THE REPORTED RETURN OF FORMER FOREIGN MINISTER AND BOURGUIBA "FAVORITE" MOHAMED MASMOUDI TO TUNIS AND HIS POSSIBLE REHABILITATION. AS NOTED IN OTHER REPORTING, MASMOUDI WAS SAID TO HAVE RETURNED TO TUNISIA ABOUT AUGUST 10, TO HAVE SEEN PRESIDENT BOURGUIBA, AND TO HAVE LEFT THE COUNTRY ABOUT FOUR DAYS LATER. WHILE NORMALLY WELL-INFORMED SOURCES CONTINUE TO ASSERT THAT THIS BOURGUIBA-MASMOUDI MEETING ACTUALLY OCCURRED, OTHER AUTHORITATIVE SOURCES CLAIM OTHERWISE. AMONG OTHERS, AGRICULTURE MINISTER HASSEN BELKHODJA, A SOMETIME BUSINESS ASSOCIATE AND POLITICAL ALLY OF MASMOUDI, TOLD THE AMBASSADOR FLATLY THAT MASMOUDI HAD NOT BEEN HERE.

2. IN THE HALF-LIGHT OF TUNISIAN INTERNAL POLITICS, WHERE RUMORS ARE NORMALLY THE ONLY PUBLIC KNOWLEDGE OF

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THE BEHIND-THE-SCENES MANEUVERING FOR PRESIDENTIAL FAVOR,

IT IS DIFFICULT TO KNOW JUST WHAT DID TAKE PLACE WITH REGARD TO MASMOUDI'S REPORTED RETURN AND POSSIBLE REHABILITATION. WE NOTE THAT AMONG THE MANY ACCOUNTS HEARD WHICH SAY MASMOUDI WAS HERE, NO INDIVIDUAL IS NAMED (EXCEPT OF COURSE FOR PRESIDENT BOURGUIBA HIMSELF) AS HAVING ACTUALLY SEEN MASMOUDI. THERE IS A GENERAL CONSENSUS, NONETHELESS, THAT BOTH MASMOUDI AND THE PRESIDENT, OR CONFIDANTS OF THE PRESIDENT, HAD MADE MOVES TOWARD A RECONCILIATION. SOME SAY THAT RECONCILIATION WAS COMPLETED AND REMAINS A SECRET, BUT MOST SAY THAT, WHETHER OR NOT MASMOUDI ACTUALLY MET THE PRESIDENT, NO FINAL AGREEMENT HAS BEEN REACHED BETWEEN THE TWO WHICH WOULD PERMIT MASMOUDI TO EMERGE FROM HIS THIRD PERIOD OF POLITICAL EXILE SINCE TUNISIAN INDEPENDENCE.

3. ASIDE FROM THE IMMEDIATE QUESTION OF WHETHER MASMOUDI IS OR IS NOT REHABILITATED, THIS RECENT SPATE OF RUMORS DOES ILLUSTRATE HIS CONTINUING POTENTIALLY HIGH STATUS IN THE TUNISIAN ESTABLISHMENT. HE HAS MANY FRIENDS WHO OCCUPY POSITIONS OF INFLUENCE AND THEY WOULD PRESUMABLY BE PLEASED WITH HIS RETURN TO GRACE. THEY NO DOUBT SUPPORT HIM TO THE EXTENT THAT THIS DOES NOT JEOPARDIZE THEIR OWN TIES TO BOURGUIBA. MASMOUDI REMAINS A FORCE TO BE CONSIDERED IN TUNISIAN POLITICAL LIFE.

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